

## Commentary on Moin: Eurasian History, Comparative Literature, Haptology

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### Abstract

Anglophone instead of English literature). Moin explicitly draws on Victor Lieberman's historical-political unit of an expanded Eurasia, which distinguishes mainland regions historically exposed to the perennial invasions of Inner Asian nomads from the protected "rimlands." However, Moin's own units of comparison (Marlowe's Tamburlaine and Akbar's Jesus) assume—for want of a better characterization—a New Historicist textualization of culture that blurs the boundaries between literary/visual representations and historical events. His "strange parallel" is between a play and an emperor's self-fashioning, a staged representation of sovereignty and the "theater of sovereignty" itself. In Moin's account, Marlowe found in Tamburlaine (Timur), and his living descendent Akbar, the inspiration for the Renaissance Magus (ideal man) who transcended organized religion; during the same decades, Akbar embraced messianic Jesus in the tradition of heroic epics of Inner Asian kings to present himself as the most sacred being on earth, above the distinctions of religion. Moin thus engages Lieberman's historical model both to affirm the distinction between the protected zone of Marlowe's Elizabethan England and the exposed zone of Akbar's Mughal India, as well as to explain the strange coincidence of an English playwright and an Indian emperor's respective uses of Timur. As far-flung but synchronic events/representations, they attest to a variegated early modern Eurasian "political imagination" of Inner Asian kingship.

The sharp end of the stake here is in "worlding" English literature using a panoramic paradigm of Eurasian history. In this context, the paper initially brought to mind Littleton and Malcour's *From Scythia to Camelot*, which traces elements of the King Arthur tales to the epics of Alan and Sarmatian steppe peoples of the first millennium BCE.[1] However, unlike Littleton and Malcour (or studies of parallels in Indic and Greek epic, say), who explore the transmission of the Inner Asian heroic epics themselves, Moin argues that circulating myths of Timur influenced Marlowe and Akbar both. Littleton and Malcour's work also reaches back much further in time than Lieberman's early modern period of Eurasian integration (800–1824 C.E.). Since China, at the other exposed end of the Eurasian continent, also had a rich pre- and

post-800 C.E. literary archive of Inner Asian kingship (e.g., Sima Qian's [?145–?86 B.C.E.] *Records of the Grand Historian*, Wei Shou's [506–572 C.E.] *History of the Wei Dynasty*), one might further explore the chronological and regional possibilities of Lieberman's historical paradigm for literary studies.[2]

More importantly, Moin's article raises a broader question concerning the use of world historical paradigms—and Eurasian or Central Asian history in particular—in literary studies. By literary studies, I loosely refer here to the whole lumpen mass of practices and theories (classical philology, cultural studies, etc.) associated with the term in the US academy, many of which are of course already part of the repertoire of the historian. Moin's paper prompts us to ask what studies of representation and meaning can do for, or to, large-scale social science models such as Lieberman's. Central Eurasian literary cultures have not become "universalized" in critical theory in the way that, say, Renaissance England has in New Historicism or British India has in postcolonial theory. Central Asia has, however, become the paradigm-shifting element in an array of historical studies that includes Lieberman's recent *Strange Parallels*. I'll briefly address these other historical templates—the world system and the Silk Road respectively—in an effort to give Moin's use of Lieberman some context. I should clarify that what follows is a very preliminary sketch of potential methods of bringing modernity-centered comparative literature (the incohesive tradition to which I belong) into conversation with the kind of work Moin is doing.

Lieberman's template of world history, which makes regional vulnerability to nomadic invasions the key to the historical development of two types of political formations, provides a base (as it were) to the superstructure of the cultural and literary forms that Moin tracks. Compare this to the issues raised by literary scholar Franco Moretti's influential use of world history. Moretti differentiates two world literatures: an internally diverse *Weltliteratur* shaped by a "mosaic of separate, 'local' cultures" prior to the eighteenth century; and our increasingly homogeneous world literary system "unified by the international literary market" since the eighteenth century.[3] This latter world literary system is grounded in the political-economic model of the modern capitalist world system, and Moretti promotes a mode of distant reading modeled on the reading practices of world systems analysis (e.g. synthesizing the works of national literature specialists). In the context of Moin and Lieberman, one should note that Moretti's world systems analysts of choice are Immanuel Wallerstein and Fernand Braudel, and not Andre Gunder Frank or Barry Gills, who push the world system back five thousand years from the present, or Janet Abu-Lughod, who traces several successive world systems back to the thirteenth century.[4] Frank, Gills, and Lughod all revise Wallerstein's Europe-centered paradigm by making Eurasia (and at times China) the heartland of world history. Adopting an older world systems model in which Eurasia is the center wouldn't necessarily affect Moretti's essential point about the effects of the modern global literary market (e.g. homogenization, the travel of plot versus style). However, it highlights the perennial role of pre-modern literature

as modern literature's foil in critical theory, and the need for a greater awareness of ongoing debates over the historiography of pre-modernity. If large swathes of the pre-modern world did not comprise a mosaic of separate local cultures, which historical template should pre-modern literary scholars turn toward to make connections? Is the kind of long-distance connective work that Moin is doing best restricted to Lieberman's period (c. 800–1830) and paradigm? What kinds of comparative projects are enabled by arguments made by Central Asian scholars that push the Eurasian *oikoumene* back further to antiquity and even to prehistoric times?

Before turning to the Silk Road template, one might note Gayatri Spivak's proposal for a new comparative literature, which entails a critique of the world systems equation of economic with cultural systems ("literature is what escapes the system; you cannot speed read it").[5] Although this is specific to the economic world system, Moin's use of Lieberman's political paradigm at times tends towards over-determination (for example, in the claim that England could only represent Inner Asian kingship on stage because it was in the protected zone while India in the exposed zone could stage it as a political reality). Interestingly, Spivak (like Moretti) uses pre-modernity as a foil, but as an inspirational one. The "planetarity" that she proposes (in place of "global" thinking) focuses on cultures within cultures, and demographic movements between the predetermined regions of modern Area Studies. She argues that this perspective is best imagined from the pre-capitalist, and pre-continental cultures of the planet.

The Silk Road template—like Frank, Gills, and Abu-Lughod's world systems—takes the problem of contact (and non-contact) further back in time than Lieberman's *Strange Parallels*. As much a metaphor as a model of history, the term Silk Road has headlined exhibitions, performances, interdisciplinary academic conferences, as well as diplomatic and oil pipeline projects. Christopher Beckwith's recent *Silk Road Empires* defines the Silk Road as "the entire Central Eurasian economy, or socio-economic-political-cultural system, the great flourishing of which impressed itself upon the people of antiquity and the Middle Ages." [6] Like Lieberman's *Strange Parallels*, Beckwith remakes Central Eurasian pastoral nomads as the key political agents, rather than the mere middleman of an interconnected world history. For Beckwith, the Silk Road begins with Indo-European migrations four millennia ago and ends with the conquest of Central Eurasia by peripheral Russian and Qing empires in the seventeenth century. Valerie Hansen's *The Silk Road: A New History* serves as a useful revisionist contrast to Liebermann and Beckwith (and world system analyses), inasmuch as she argues the profound importance of Central Asian trade networks not in directly transforming world political and economic history, but in becoming "the planet's most famous cultural artery for the exchange between east and west of religions, art, languages, and new technologies." [7] The Silk Road, loosely defined by Hansen as "the overland routes leading west out of China through Central Asia to Syria and beyond" especially during the 200–1000 CE period, was "one of the least traveled routes in human history" and bore insignificant quantities of trade goods.

However, it transformed the world precisely by transmitting unfamiliar ideas, technology, and artistic motifs. Hansen is not interested in the politics of representation in the way that Moin is, but this historical template of Silk Road exchange has an open-endedness that privileges local movements for those who might want to make literary connections between far-flung places in the absence of narratives of conquest or inter-regional political and economic integration. In this model, the quantitatively insignificant can become significant within cultural, religious, or technological history. Although Hansen does not make this claim, what constitutes a Silk Road “event” becomes open to rethinking.

We need more of what I would call haptographies like Moin’s. “Haptography” (haptomai, “I touch”; graphō, “I write”; i.e., “writing about contact”) refers both to the archive of contact and exchange—for example, travel narratives, bilingual inscriptions, buried exotica—and studies of contact. Haptography demands certain styles of looking, reading, and writing; it invites a re-examination of the canon, an excavation of new texts, a novel juxtaposition with a different set of maps in mind. Haptography is supplementary and interdisciplinary—it is meant to aid, not replace, other modes of reading and research. Since haptography, like ethnography and other disciplines, necessarily forms in advance its subject of inquiry (here, contact), we also need critical “haptologies” (discourses or theories of contact) that clarify the diverse possibilities and limits of defining and describing contact and exchange (and their absence), and that make visible our geo-historical unconscious, whether in terms of Lieberman’s strange parallels, Sanjay Subrahmayan’s connected histories, Lydia Liu’s trans-lingual practices, Mary Louise Pratt’s trans-culturalism, Spivak’s planetarity, Leela Gandhi’s affective communities, Henry Louis Gates’ signifying, or Nicola Di Cosmo’s frontier contexts.

Pre-modern sites of haptography and haptology already include ancient Greece, the Levant, and the Mediterranean (e.g., Bernal’s *Black Athena*, Burkert’s *Orientalizing Revolution*, Horden and Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea*) and medieval China (e.g. Mair’s *Painting and Performance*, Kieschnick’s *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, *Dunhuangology*), i.e., contexts of large-scale cultural inheritance.[8] However, one doesn’t necessarily need an account of wholesale cultural transformation or imperial conquest, or even a strong theory of pre-modern world systems to explore long-distance literary and cultural connections or resonances. Globalization and perennial nomadic conquest are but two haptologies. One might also, as in the case of Moin’s (protected zone) approach to Marlowe or Hansen’s Silk Road, pursue “minor” haptographies. These scattered, fragmented and ostensibly inconsequential connections may not at first add up to much on the quantitative and democratic scales of political and economic history. However, this is precisely where the more speculative labors of the literary scholar might be used to unpack the significance of far-flung haptic imaginaries for the past as well as the present. (Such

minor pursuits may even lead us away from the longstanding politics of “influence,” or, who did what and where, first.)

Finally, the haptologist will have to ask what is particular about panoramic studies of Eurasia (Inner Asian nomadic conquests? Silk Road transfers?) in comparison to, say, circum-Atlantic studies, Pacific studies, Mediterranean or Black Sea studies, or thassalographies more broadly? How have the archives of Central Asian history lent themselves to some disciplines better than others (e.g., art history versus literature)? Why might the case of pre-modern Eurasia exemplify the need to enlarge “literature” to include a spectrum of oral, written, visual, non-canonical and canonical materials?[9] Bids to take seriously the centrality of Central Asia within world history go back at least as far as the nineteenth century. The colonial geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term Silk Road in 1877 in his historical surveys of ancient and medieval transcontinental trade from China that he used to map out the path for future railway commerce between China and Europe.[10] Halford Mackinder’s “The Geographical Pivot of History” (1904) made Eurasia the “Heartland” of much of world history as well as the Great Game imperial rivalries of his day.[11] A critical haptologist will thus, like the new philologist or self-reflexive ethnographer, have to ask: what are the political, institutional, and psychic desires shaping this effort to introduce or universalize the panoramic Afro-Eurasian perspective? Similarly, Spivak’s close-reader or Pollock’s philologist will have not only to consider the peripheries and the (often quantitatively insignificant) long-distance connections, but also the model of historical contact or non-contact at play.[12]

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  8. C. Scott Littleton and Linda A. Malcor, *From Scythia to Camelot: A Radical Reassessment of the Legends of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail* (New York: Garland, 1994). ♣
  9. Lieberman explores the similarities as well as differences between political developments in the two kinds of zone. China's "civilizational precocity" (it began its state and culture formation much earlier and without a borrowed blueprint) and its massive size, as well the influence of semi-nomadic Inner Asian peoples mark China's difference from the peripheral protected zone and its parallels with early modern India. See Victor B. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830. Volume 2: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 900–04. ♣
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16. For a call to expand and revise what constitutes a representation or an event, see Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1–19; for a discussion of the very different types of texts addressed by sinologists (for example) and the cultural turn in historical studies, see Christian de Pee, "Cycles of Cathay: Sinology, Philology, and Histories of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) in the United States," *Fragments* 2 (2012): 35–67. ♣
17. Tamara Chin, "The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877," *Critical Inquiry* 40(1) (Autumn 2013): 194–219. ♣
18. Halford Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal* 23 (April 1904): 434. ♣
19. Sheldon Pollock's "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," *Critical Inquiry* 35(4) (Summer 2009): 934, defines philology as "the discipline of making sense of texts." As with Spivak's close reading, the texts at stake are written texts that must be read in the original. ♣